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SUBJECT: LESSONS LEARNED FROM EMBASSY CAIRO'S EVACUATION OF AMERICAN
CITIZENS FROM GAZA

¶1. Summary: Embassy Cairo evacuated four families with American citizens and family members entitled to immigrant visas, and assisted in the evacuation of over 100 foreign nationals on January 19, 2009. The evacuation went smoothly and lessons learned follow. End Summary.

¶2. On January 19, 2009 sixteen Embassy Cairo employees assembled at 0415 at the Embassy in order to evacuate four American families and over 100 foreign nationals from Gaza. Fighting in Gaza had closed the borders and trapped these evacuees in a dangerous situation. Embassy Tel Aviv had organized the evacuation of foreign nationals within Gaza, and Embassy Cairo had assumed the task of coordinating the various missions from the Rafah border back to Cairo. Weeks of negotiations between embassies in Cairo and the Egyptian MFA and MoI had resulted in clearances for the foreign nationals to cross into Egypt.

¶3. Lesson 1 - check, check and recheck. Embassy Cairo worked with Embassy Tel Aviv on a possible International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICRC) escort within Gaza for our evacuees. In the end the ICRC did not have the resources to provide escort, and many of the foreign evacuees chose not to go at the last minute due to security concerns about the safety of travel within Gaza. This was out of our control, but in future we should be very blunt with other missions that escort inside Gaza is not guaranteed and evacuees should plan accordingly. We also brought our satellite phone with us to test at Rafah. We and RSO tried to make it work, but we were not successful. In the future we will check on our sat phone before we have a crisis!

¶4. Embassy Cairo assessed the security situation in Rafah ahead of time and determined appropriate procedures for the trip. Embassy Cairo sent the Consul General, ACS Chief, three experienced ACS LES, three A/RSOs and two RSO LES, in addition to three Embassy drivers familiar with the drive to Rafah to assist in the evacuation. GSO provided immense support in logistics and arranging for two large buses for the convoy. Embassy Cairo brought ample supplies of water, food, diapers, toilet paper and paper towels, as well as the DS-3072 (Evacuation Documentation) and our ever-trustworthy blackberries.

¶5. Four foreign consuls accompanied us in the US Embassy vans due to lack of their own personal transportation. The other 10 missions who wished to participate in the evacuation followed our motorcade in 20 additional vehicles. Needless to say this made for an extremely long convoy, but to our surprise it held together for the entire six-hour trip to Rafah with no issues en route.

¶6. Lesson 2 - Think locally. Once at the Rafah border we quickly learned our second lesson - all lists of evacuee names should be provided in writing translated into the local language. Every mission present had their lists in English, and we all spent time on arrival handwriting the lists in Arabic at the request of the border officials.

¶7. Lesson 3 - Prepare to wait. Despite three weeks of pre-clearances and umpteen assurances that our citizens would cross at the border with no difficulty, we had to start almost from scratch upon arrival at Rafah. After submitting our lists we waited, and waited, and waited. Finally buses began to arrive with foreign nationals. We cannot stress enough the importance of LES in this evacuation. Their language skills and ability to cross cultural barriers with the border control officers were invaluable

in getting our citizens across. We were the only mission to successfully get all of our evacuees out. Every other mission had to leave citizens behind due to lack of planning, lack of communication or lack of influence with the Egyptian authorities. Taking the time over the last year to build relationships with GoE officials meant that we could call on those contacts in this time of need.

18. Lesson 4 - Always bring your tools. Hours into the process our one stumbling block was the lack of documentation for an eight-month old baby who could not get a passport due to the fighting and restrictions on travel. In the end the ACS Chief convinced the passport authorities to let her write a statement that she would be responsible for all of the Americans entering Egypt. She wrote the statement, sealed it with her portable hand seal, and the problem was solved. It sounds strange, but without the hand seal it is not clear whether the authorities would have let the Amcits enter. Six long hours after arriving in Rafah we departed with 10 Amcits, 9 Romanian citizens, 5 Turkish citizens and 5 Irish citizens in our vehicles, plus over 100 other nationals, who departed with their Consuls seperately. We all arrived back in Cairo around 2300, tired but satisfied with a successful mission completed.

Scobey